

BY DANIEL ELLSBERG

Blind Men's Bluffs

A public opinion survey in the spring of 1984 sponsored by the Committee on the Present Danger confirmed previous findings that roughly 80 percent of the public favored a U.S./Soviet nuclear weapons freeze at current levels. Yet Ronald Reagan continued to denounce the idea of a bilateral halt to the arms race and refused to explore it with the Soviets.

He maintained this stand up to Election Day. The day after, it was apparent that half or more of the 80 percent who favored the freeze had voted for Ronald Reagan.

No doubt a number of factors went into this result. For one, Mondale's own "commitment" to the freeze—and to the moratorium on warhead and missile testing promised in the Democratic platform—was almost inaudible in the fall campaign and in the debates with Reagan. But the Reagan landslide has been followed by apparent public acceptance—at any rate, lack of outraged protest—of Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, his persistently non-negotiable positions in Geneva, and his success at winning congressional support for destabilizing strategic programs.

It is difficult to believe that 80 percent of the citizenry, or any large fraction of that, shares with freeze activists a sense that ending the nuclear arms race by a comprehensive freeze or a moratorium on missile and warhead testing is a matter of urgency or high national priority. We have, it would seem, a lot of convincing left to do. But how, exactly, to proceed?

TALKING AND ARMING

Our movement began to roll toward those perplexing opinion poll majorities in 1981 when there were no strategic talks going on with the Soviets, and none scheduled. I now think that most of the people favoring the freeze in polls and referenda were simply telling President Reagan that they wanted this situation to change—i.e., to change back. They wanted him to overcome his reservations about the SALT process and get back to negotiating some kind of arms limitations with the Soviets. They expected him to

do his best to arrive at agreements, but whether successful in this or not (they no longer expect success but don't hold it against him) they wanted Reagan "talking to the Russians."

Reagan got that message, and responded. He sent delegations to INF and START. Instead of talking about the need for superiority, he outflanked the Freeze Campaign by talking about "reductions," and lately, "abolition."



None of this has impeded Weinberger's buildup program, and in fact it amounts to nothing more—nothing more was demanded, apparently—than a formal return to the arms control approach of Reagan's predecessors, which was always good enough in the past to keep the arms race going. Reagan's one innovation is the SDI, designed to assure nuclear testing forever and to preclude any risk that the Soviets might accept proposed limits on offensive forces.

Further inducements to the rapid growth of the antinuclear movement in both Europe and the United States in 1981 were the colorful statements on nuclear war by Reagan officials. They claimed to believe that nuclear war could be limited, won and survived. So Reagan induced his officials to stop saying these things, to Robert Scheer at least.

As with his shift on negotiations, he then found that to agree with the mass of the public that "nuclear war cannot be

won and must never be fought" he need not slow down any of his first-strike weapons programs. For the formula does not insist—nor does the public, it seems—that nuclear war must never be credibly threatened, hence prepared for.

The logic of Reagan's policies did not, in fact, depend on any of the "crazy" Reaganite notions that were publicly retired. After all, the same strategic logic, policies and weapons capabilities have been pursued by every President for the last 40 years. (The notion that "war-fighting strategy," or counterforce targeting, or first-use threats, or plans for preemption, were invented under Reagan is simply a delusion.) Nor have the types of weapons needed to implement these traditional (secret) policies changed recently. With the exception of the B-1 and SDI, every single weapon that Reagan is now pursuing is a Ford-Carter weapon.

Weinberger's predecessors did not program these particular weapons because they feared a Soviet surprise attack on the United States, nor because they looked forward to winning nuclear wars with the Soviets. These weapons are designed to strengthen the ability of American expeditionary forces to avert, or defeat, non-nuclear challenges to U.S. and allied interests far from our shores. They are to do this by enhancing the credibility of U.S. threats to initiate "limited" nuclear war.

Of course, in addition to overseas interests, there are domestic incentives that are also critical to sustaining the programs. The three services all "need" new missiles, the producers need contracts, unions need jobs, congressional and presidential candidates need votes and contributions. All these needs can be satisfied by weapons programs that are compatible with any of the current "arms control" programs—except for the freeze. Both these external and internal considerations explain why the freeze is not perceived by the foreign policy and military establishment as "serious arms control."

It is true that public support for the freeze in polls has held up, despite competition since 1982 from Reagan's various INF and START proposals, renewed interest in SALT II, and congressional formulas for build-down and Midgetman-as-stabilizer. But, in

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truth, we lack opinion data suggesting that the public *prefers* the freeze to any of these other proposals (now including SDI), or even recognizes a sharp and significant difference between the freeze and all of the others. I conjecture that most of the public does not.

From my point of view, that is awful. I see all the difference in the world. The freeze would stop the arms race; the other proposals would not. The freeze would halt further testing or deployment of all the impending U.S. and Soviet first-strike (or unverifiable) weapons that raise the risk of nuclear war. Every one of these weapons is compatible with—is permitted and likely to be pursued under—each of the “official” arms control alternatives to the freeze. If the public doesn’t see that as a vital and urgent difference—and I’m afraid it may not—then our message needs a good deal of sharpening, and most of our work remains to be done.

BETTER THREATS THAN RED

The study last fall by Daniel Yankelovich for the Public Agenda Foundation found that a consensus of 77 percent of Americans, asked what U.S. policy should be by the end of the decade, rejects the first-use of U.S. nuclear weapons under any circumstances, even against a non-nuclear “Soviet invasion of Europe or Japan.” Seventy-six percent say it should be U.S. policy to use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union if and only if they attack the United States first with nuclear weapons. (Eighty-one percent mistakenly believe this to be U.S. policy now.)

However, the Public Agenda poll did not ask what people thought about threatening nuclear war. But another study did. The 1984 poll for the Committee on the Present Danger, conducted by Penn and Schoen Associates, asked the question: “Do you favor or oppose telling the Soviets that we will not respond with nuclear weapons if they attack our allies?” (emphasis added). Only 1 percent favored telling the Soviets that we would not respond with nuclear weapons; 66 percent were opposed. The C.P.D. summarized this result, reasonably: “A substantial majority of Americans . . . support the *threatened* use of nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet attack against U.S. allies . . .” (emphasis added). A longer summary adds: “Interestingly, the college educated citizens are most opposed to the actual use of nuclear weapons. This same group was most in favor of keeping up the threat their use to defend our allies.”

It is good news, from Yankelovich, that the majority of Americans do not want nuclear weapons “actually used” (st) by us in combat. They don’t want clear threats to be implemented if they

fail; they want the threats to be just bluffs. But, according to the C.P.D. poll—which I find all too plausible—they do think that threats are needed, to protect our allies and overseas interests. They want the “bluffs” to be made.

This is bad news—worse than it may appear at first. For it would follow—and the political behavior of voters is regret-

The public is against nuclear war—but not against threatening nuclear war.

tably consistent with this—that they would be receptive to buying the kinds of weapons for first-use, escalation and preemptive first-strike that are designed to enhance the *credibility* of such threats. And that is essentially what the current, dangerous arms race is.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Freeze Campaign literature asserts: “We have convinced the American public of the risks of the arms race.” On the basis of these and other public opinion data, I would say, “That’s wrong.” We have convinced them of the risks associated with a nuclear war. We have not convinced them of the risks associated with acquiring new nuclear weapons—risks of testing them, deploying them, threatening with them.

Many people see the ongoing arms race as wasteful, but not enough yet see it, as we do, as adding immediately, on balance, to our overall danger. Nor have we convinced them that threats are not necessary, or not safe. That means that we have not convinced them that the means to make threats credible and effective ought to be strongly opposed. We have not taught them that Reagan’s arms race is an unacceptable approach to peace.

It is simply the other side of this that stopping the arms race, even to those who see it as desirable, does not necessarily appear as a means to higher security. The pollsters for the Committee on the Present Danger found that “the freeze is seen more as a budget-cutting measure than an answer to the country’s defense problems. Only one-third said that a nuclear freeze would reduce the chance of a nuclear war, while 55 percent said it ‘would only reduce the expense of continuing to develop nuclear weapons.’”

The main argument of the Freeze Campaign itself encourages this evaluation, perhaps inadvertently, with its emphasis on halting all weapons, without

focus on qualitative differences. Earlier campaigns that stressed “overkill” and redundancy may have had a similar effect. The Yankelovich survey asked what difference it would make to national security if both the United States and Soviet Union cut their nuclear arsenals in half (George Kennan’s proposal). It found that 61 percent said it would make no difference. Fifty-two percent said it wouldn’t matter if the two countries “froze all nuclear weapons at present levels.” Seventy-one percent felt it would make no difference if both *doubled* the size of their nuclear arsenals (the current direction).

These attitudes correspond to the 90 percent consensus Yankelovich finds among Americans that “we and the Soviets now have enough to blow up each other several times over.” In the context of political mobilization and action, emphasis on this familiar “overkill” perception can be seen to cut two ways. It points toward the infeasibility of achieving a meaningful superiority, on which Americans are now nearly unanimous. But at the same time it undercuts any judgment that achieving a mutual halt is a matter of grave urgency or priority; the chances are, as people see it, that it would make no difference to national security, only to spending.

Such judgments make a freeze look “permissible”; they do not make it look strongly necessary. On the contrary.

Speaking from a background as a weapons analyst and war planner for the Rand Corporation and Defense Department, what concerns and frightens me about the current arms race is not the number or the cost of the weapons that are multiplying, but the type of weapons that are being added on both sides, the functions and strategy they serve, and the effects of their interaction. I am well aware of the complexity and unfamiliarity of these arguments, and the contrary need for simplicity in political communication. In the past I myself deferred to these considerations. But to communicate the awareness of urgency that is appropriate and, it now appears, politically essential, there may be simply no substitute for moving beyond gut generalities to the daunting educational task of preparing more Americans to feel confident in making critical judgments on specific weapons systems, political/military strategies, and negotiating proposals.

Let us not be too hasty, this round, in judging that to be infeasible; if that is so, our experience so far suggests that real change, and survival, could be infeasible.

Thus, we need to criticize the Strategic Defense Initiative not mainly in terms of its high cost or the probability that it won’t work. The key objection is that it

guarantees the continuation of an offensive and defensive arms race that is bringing us weapons—including the SDI systems themselves—that make the world even more dangerous than it is today. And we have to oppose those other weapons—MX, ASAT, Trident II (D-5), Pershing 2, and SLCMs—along with the whole new round of Soviet counterparts, for the reasons that they lower our security and that of the world.

These weapons are not, primarily, for fighting but for threatening. That type of use is not less dangerous but its dangers need to be explained. It is one thing for Americans to accept in principle the need for nuclear first-use "bluffs" (primarily to defend Europe). It could be quite another thing for them to discover just how close we have actually come to initiating tactical nuclear war a dozen times in the past—mostly against Third World opponents with links to the Soviets—and how far our current threats are from being pure bluffs.

These new weapons coming along markedly strengthen the deadly connection between interventions and the actual first use of nuclear weapons in combat. They increase the likelihood of nuclear escalation, and of full-scale preemption once any nuclear weapon has exploded. They encourage leaders to continue to make first-use threats, to use their nuclear weapons by pointing them at others in confrontations. At the same time, the mutual buildup is making it more likely that such threats will fail, and that some day one will be carried out, at the risk of our world. These reckless programs are pushing ahead year by year, gathering momentum that makes them progressively harder to halt. Probably only a new president—rather than Congress in opposition to Reagan—could achieve a comprehensive freeze, with its requirements for negotiated verification. But Congress can and must slow down and halt individual weapons systems before that time, and could go beyond that to institute a *de facto* moratorium on the testing of warheads and flight testing of ballistic missiles—both now thoroughly verifiable without further negotiation—by making funding for such testing conditional on Soviet testing.

We cannot afford to freeze the arms race only after both sides have acquired these new weapons. We need, by every means, to stop these new developments (essentially through Congress) on the basis of a newly committed and informed public mood, and by nominating and electing a candidate in 1988 far different from any we have seen so far in dedication to protecting us from the dangers of the nuclear arms race. We have a lot of educating—of ourselves and the public—ahead of us. □